



## **State of the City 2014**

Mayor Tommy Battle

Good afternoon and thank you for being with us today. Every year I tell you how proud I am to be Mayor of this great city, and today is no exception. The progress we've made, the ability of this community to come together and support each other in times of need and opportunity, the energy and attention Huntsville is receiving as a desirable, vibrant and livable city – this is no accident.

Our success is the result of hard work by each and every one of you here today. To the businesses you run, the support you offer each other, and the many ways you reinvest in Huntsville, in your employees, your philanthropic charities, your place of worship – you are the reason we stand proud and strong today. You inspire me, and I am humbled to serve as your Mayor.

To my wife and best friend, Eula, thank you for always being in my corner. To my esteemed colleagues on the Huntsville City Council, I sincerely thank you for your service, for your dedication and your willingness to make tough decisions. Council President Mark Russell and Councilmembers Bill Kling, Richard Showers, Will Culver and our newest member Jennie Robinson, We are a team; your guidance and partnership make Huntsville a success.

To the City's Department Heads with us today – my deepest gratitude for your hard work and accomplishments this past year. These men and women are the boots on the ground. They do they heavy lifting, and I can promise you they are watching and squeezing every single tax dollar as they push forward and challenge their departments to innovate.

To our partners at the Chamber of Commerce, my colleagues Troy Trulock Mayor of Madison and Dale Strong, Chairman of the Madison County Commission, Team Redstone – General McQuiston, Leadership and service organizations, and non-profits – thank you – your teamwork is key to this community's success.

The positive attitude and hard work by the citizens of this community supersedes any challenge that seeks to divide us. We do not dwell in the negative. This is a city filled with light and promise, a city of opportunity with citizens who want to work together for jobs, better neighborhoods, clean parks and good schools. This is our focus!

To say that we are in an enviable position compared to most cities across the state and country is an understatement. Governor Bentley recently said that he spends more time recruiting industry here than anywhere else in Alabama, because that's where the demand is. You are the reason why. Our plan is working. Together, we have created a dynamic community that is widely recognized as a place that does it right.

## **Vision, Strategy, Planning**

These successes have been the result of vision, planning and hard work. All of the belt tightening and creative strategies we have employed throughout the recession have paid off, and we are realizing the benefits of making smart, and often tough decisions.

Six years ago, we set out on a course to bring greater economic prosperity to this community. We had a strategy and a plan, with goals to:

- Strengthen our educational system
- Heighten our visibility
- Improve our infrastructure
- Enhance our livability
- Attract more young professionals
- Retool our planning process

We planned for success and took action. Our mission has been straightforward: to provide a lean and accountable government that delivers quality services, job opportunities, strong infrastructure, and quality of life amenities. As a result, the past year has been extraordinary for Huntsville. It has been a year of exciting announcements, groundbreakings, and ribbon cuttings!

### *– VIDEO Presentation on Economic Development –*

Economic Development It has been an incredible year. From the moment Remington announced its decision to bring 2,000 jobs here – the State's largest announcement for 2014 – to the many expansions we have seen in local business, we are proud of Huntsville's progress.

SES, a jewel in Alabama's aviation crown, announced a major expansion for its helicopter operations, while Verizon added hundreds of new jobs to its Customer Care Center. Davidson Technologies opened up a second building in Cummings Research Park. HudsonAlpha has grown from a dozen companies to 27, and now houses some of the brightest talent on the planet.

GE Intelligent Platforms opened a new facility in South Huntsville, for research, design system integration and manufacturing, all under one roof. Northrop Grumman opened a Center for Integration and Engineering.

And through all of the new announcements and expansions, we celebrated companies like PPG who marked 45 years in business here as a leader in aerospace transparencies.

## **Retail Development**

On the retail side, we identified businesses new to the market and worked to land them in Huntsville. We want our citizens to have the shopping amenities found in major markets, and we want their sales tax dollars to remain here, so they can be reinvested in our roads and schools.

We welcome Whole Foods, Cabela's, the Neighborhood Market, Orvis, At Home, and a host of new restaurants and boutiques. Huntsville is a regional retail center.

## **Urban Development: ROI and Attracting Young Professionals**

Our economic plan also honed in on urban redevelopment – maximizing our footprint and reinvesting in projects that provide the highest return on our taxpayer dollars.

The newly opened Twickenham Square, the recently announced Big Spring Square, and coming soon, The Avenue on Jefferson and Holmes. These are the types of lifestyle projects that attract young professionals – another one of our goals. These public private partnerships are generating hundreds of new jobs. They are also bringing energy and excitement to the urban core through a mix of housing, retail, entertainment and lodging. Small footprint. Big payoff. Smart stuff.

Revitalization extends to the retired school buildings across our city. We are proud that many of these properties will be repurposed. East Clinton Elementary is now a private school with a public park, Johnson High and Grissom's campuses will be redeveloped into great public facilities.

West Huntsville Elementary is turning hip, into an entrepreneurs house for innovators and makers, and Stone Middle School will become home to at least two craft breweries, with additional entertainment and dining options and a concert lawn for music and public activities.

These are outstanding projects that revitalize neighborhoods and enhance our quality of life. Our economic development strategy is working.

Since 2009, we've seen \$1.2 billion in new capital investment in Huntsville. Our population has grown 4.7%. We've announced 13,000 new jobs and hundreds of new businesses to the Huntsville economy, making our job growth among the nation's strongest. Even more impressive, three-fourths of our new jobs were generated by existing businesses. Unemployment is down to 5.7 percent from our recessionary high of 7.3 percent.

## **Jobs: Visibility**

At present, our team is actively working on 39 economic development projects ranging from a few dozen jobs to several thousand. It appears as though we are on the 'top five lists' for industrial site selectors. Some days, we are scrambling to entertain two, or even three site selection groups coming to see the Rocket City. It's a good problem to have.

The companies we recruit are small, medium and large, spanning a wide range of industries. Diversification is critical, and we are fortunate that we are able to be selective. At this time, we have prime land, infrastructure and the skilled workforce – not to mention a quality of life that is second to none.

We're listening to our local businesses, too. Remember I said three-fourths of our new jobs are coming from existing businesses? We want to be certain the City is contributing to, and not inhibiting, local companies from growing and prospering.

A growing economy brings new jobs, and we want to connect the companies with available jobs to the people who need them. We are doing this through an ongoing series of career readiness seminars with our education and business partners.

One example is Calhoun Community College's program with Toyota that offers students practical experience while attending school. Drake State's new mechatronics program helps support the hundreds of new jobs emerging from growing helicopter operations at SES.

UAH collaborates with the Huntsville City Schools to support programs in space science, cyber-security, atmospheric sciences, engineering and more. Alabama A & M announced a new logistics program that is vital to the Army's AMC's global role in controlling materiel.

City Schools are teaching advanced manufacturing through the Greenpower electric car competition, where students design, engineer, and manufacture automotive products of the future.

All this adds up to an educated and qualified workforce. The community that can provide a highly trained, well-educated work force will win the jobs competition of the future.

In the mix of these targeted academic programs and training, we also want to nurture the innovators and entrepreneurs. Somewhere out there in Huntsville right now, a programmer is sitting in a coffee shop developing the next great app. A former teacher is trying to start up her own day care center, and a craft brewer is creating the next specialty beverage. Somewhere in Huntsville, the next best cyber encryption program is under design, and organic chefs are creating jalapeno jellies, sweet pickles, sauces and mustards to sell. What diversity we find here in Huntsville!

To encourage innovation and entrepreneurship, we established an advisory team of “creatives,” where we are listening and learning. Entrepreneurs thrive in a stimulating culture. We want to do our part.

It is fascinating to listen to young entrepreneurs like Brandon Cruse talk about a team he worked with needing \$7,000 to produce a commercial program. The \$7,000 was so the team could live on Ramen noodles the six months it took to design the program.

Remember our goal to heighten visibility? Our Huntsville initiatives with GEO, Cyber, Energy and the new Bio-tech have put the global spotlight on the depth of capabilities and opportunities in our city and across the region.

In the past few months alone, these initiatives have hosted conferences, summits, and tabletop exercises in Huntsville that drew the senior most leadership in government and private enterprise in cyber security, geospatial intelligence, energy, and biotech research – and not just from our country, but from Europe and Asia. You can bet the smart eyes are on Huntsville and the work we are doing here.

## **GIG City: Infrastructure**

Part of making Huntsville a vibrant, globally connected community is looking at our connectivity. In digital communications, it's all about big data and speed. We need a telecommunications infrastructure that's bigger, faster, more reliable, and affordable.

After input from our Economic Development Advisory Council, we created a task force to explore our future connectivity needs. This January, I am pleased to announce we will issue our first Request for Proposal for a vendor to start the process toward Huntsville providing fiber optic Internet to the business and fiber to the home.

From here forward, Internet connectivity will be as important as any other utility component of our infrastructure investment.

Electricity, water, sewer and roads are the infrastructure that has taken us to the 21st Century. Fiber optic Internet is also an important infrastructure component.

When we connect our community to the world, we help our businesses reach new markets, and we help our citizens reach a quality of life they want and expect from a Tech City.

## **Restore Our Roads: Infrastructure**

Technology is exciting. Roads, sewer and utilities and potholes, maybe not so much, but they are determining factors in our industrial recruitment and high standard of living.

110,000 people commute to jobs in and out of Huntsville each day. Our primary roadways keep us viable as a regional employment center. So, last year, when state budget cuts delayed or cut our major road projects, we set out on a “Restore Our Roads” campaign to highlight the importance of these major corridors.

After months of discussion, we signed an unprecedented \$250 million cost-sharing contract with the State of Alabama to start construction on eight of our top state road projects within five years.

This includes overpasses at Mastin Lake on North Parkway and at Byrd Spring and Lily Flagg on South Parkway, and the beginning of the new Northern Bypass and improvements to highway 72 west and east at I 565.

We could not have accomplished this creative solution without the partnership of Governor Robert Bentley and Highway Director John Cooper. We thank them for their commitment. State Representative Mac McCutcheon was also key in these negotiations, and we are grateful to you for your help.

Another 19 primary road projects are also under way, for a total investment of \$383 million. These are roads that move traffic and are vital to a healthy transportation network. Between road construction and all of the new developments breaking ground around here, we say that 2015 will be the “Year of the Orange Cones.”

## **The BIG Picture: Retool Planning**

While all of this development is exciting, our administration remains a strong proponent of measured growth. Smart growth. Planned growth. We do not want to outrun our infrastructure.

For the past six years, we have been deliberate in our planning, with a cost-conscious eye on projects that provide maximum return on investment for our taxpayer dollars. And that strategy won’t change.

But, with one eye on the checkbook, we need to take a longer view of where we make our investments. Huntsville is evolving, demographically, economically and socially, and it is time to take a renewed look at the big picture. What do we want our city to look like 10-20-30 years from now?

We launched The BIG Picture, our comprehensive master planning process in May, and we are pleased that thousands of citizens have already participated. They are enthusiastically invested in this opportunity to shape Huntsville for decades to come.

Whether you are an Empty Nester, GenXer, or Millennial, this plan is about your future.

*-Video presentation on The BIG Picture -*

We've had great conversations about parks, schools and revitalizing neighborhoods, and we are only half-way through The BIG Picture planning process. If you have not been to the BIG Picture web site, I encourage you to do so –and learn more about this master planning effort. All of the keynotes with guest speakers are featured, and you can post your ideas, too.

We anticipate the final report will be presented to the community next summer. The planning department will be tasked with annual updates, to accurately represent the market desires of our evolving city.

## **Livability**

As a mid-size city, Huntsville is in that sweet spot where we are cultured enough to fulfill the needs and interests of citizens who could choose to live anywhere, but small enough to be authentic, with a southern sense of family and community that draws people together.

People may come here for the economic opportunities, but they stay because of our high quality of life. In a city of less than 200,000 people, our professional symphony orchestra just celebrated its 60th year. Our Museum of Art is mounting superb exhibitions and offering lectures with authors, writers, and artists. It's truly becoming a cultural center for all citizens. The Arts Council is working with the City to launch our first Public Art Plan that will incorporate art into new developments.

The Arts and Entertainment Districts are extremely popular, and have driven an increase in special event permits this year – up 28 percent. These are our festivals, parades, 5K runs, and food truck rallies. Who knew five food trucks and a guy playing a guitar could draw 5,000 people?

We are committed to greater investment in our parks, greenways, and recreational opportunities. Our goal is to link play spaces to green spaces, bike trails to walking trails, and to connect greenways to public amenities.

If you have been out to John Hunt Park, you will see our progress. We have started removing the old fences, taxiways and laying the foundations for the new design. Trees are going in, and we thank the volunteers from Toyota, the Huntsville Track Club and Lowe's South Parkway for helping us extend trails, install fencing, and plant trees. A true public-private partnership. We have committed funds in the capital plan for the next 10 years and will be looking for more public-private partnership opportunities.

## **Education**

When it comes to public education in Huntsville, our city school system is recognized as one of the premier programs in the state. Through the leadership of our superintendent and school board, we are receiving national recognition for our innovation and sweeping reforms that are transforming our schools.

In the past three years, enrollment has continued to climb and scholarships are at an all-time high, awarding the Class of 2014, \$41 million to attend the nation's top colleges and universities.

Early childhood learning opportunities include 37 new pre-kindergarten programs serving more than 660 students. These formative years are critical in a child's education. If a child enters kindergarten unprepared to learn to read and write, it is an uphill battle from there forward.

Not only will our children be prepared, they will be positioned to excel. At Monte Sano Elementary recently, I watched first grade students write their names in binary code. Fourth and fifth graders are already using code to write programs. Technology is changing the way our students learn and think, from building greenpower cars, to reading Shakespeare on an iPad, to working math problems in a lab that resembles a video arcade.

Our schools are collaborating with higher education and local industry. For the first time, advanced manufacturing students will design and fabricate flight hardware for the space station using a Fortus 3D Printer. They will also design parts for a Deep Space Habitat Suit for NASA. Pretty cool stuff.

All of our high schools and two middle schools now have cyber security teams. Three weeks ago, in round one of this year's Cyber Patriot Competition, the students captured 15 of the top 22 spots in Alabama. Incidentally, two of the teams are all girls! We expect more wins – remember Grissom placed 2nd in the nation last year.



The School Board is spending millions to construct new schools, invest in curriculum and recruit committed teachers, so every child can experience a high quality education.

From government to the business community and our residents – this city is *fully committed* to providing the best education for all of our students.

## **Government**

The State of the City, your City, is better than good. It is great. Our budget is lean and balanced, and we earned triple A credit ratings for the sixth straight year.

The course we embarked upon six years ago has brought us here today – and we need to keep doing what we are doing. The plan is working. Our goal is to attract the best and brightest. For Huntsville to be the city of choice for young talent and seasoned professionals. To draw the world's most innovative companies.

It takes high quality education, a robust infrastructure, and an enviable quality of life to make us competitive. Competitive beyond Alabama, beyond the United States, competitive on the world stage, where we must be front and center.

We are a city of doers and thinkers and creators. Together, we are Huntsville. Thank you for being here today. God bless you, and God bless the City of Huntsville.

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*November 17, 2014*